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Char Miller
Pomona College

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"The World Creeps In": Hiram Bingham III and the Decline in Missionary Fervor

Char Miller

We live in two different worlds of thought and my philosophy does not seem good to you because it has been born and nourished under different conditions.

Hiram Bingham III to Hiram Bingham, Jr.
26 December 1899

On 4 November 1929, Senator Hiram Bingham of Connecticut became only the third member of the United States Senate to be censured by his colleagues. Bingham had placed Charles Eyanson, a paid clerk of the Connecticut Manufacturers Association, on the Senate payroll, and had brought Eyanson into secret Tariff Committee meetings. During those hearings, at Bingham's behest, Eyanson helped write those aspects of the Tariff Bill affecting the prospects of Connecticut industry. The conflict of interest was clear—and Senator George W. Norris, paragon of Progressive virtue, moved that his fellow Republican be reprimanded:

RESOLVED, that the action of the Senator from Connecticut . . . is contrary to good morals and senatorial ethics and tends to bring the Senate into dishonor and disrepute and such conduct is hereby condemned.

After extensive debate, the resolution passed by a vote of 54 to 22.¹

Dishonor, disrepute, contrary to good morals: the charges read like an indictment handed down by Bingham's missionary father or grandfather chastising a wayward Polynesian Christian. That a Bingham was on the receiving end of this rebuke, that the scion of this devout missionary family came to be pilloried for misconduct seems incredible. No less significant than this reversal of the Bingham's usual role of moral arbiter, was the Senator's very presence in the political arena. Politics is a secular calling, one that panders to earthly concerns, and his vocation thereby

Char Miller, currently Professor of History at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, is working on a five-generation biography of the Bingham family.

broke with another family tenet—ministerial service to God and to man's spiritual needs.

To understand how and why Hiram Bingham III altered the course of his family's historical commitment to missionary service, one must recognize, as he later would, that the world in which he was raised was unlike that of his father, Hiram Bingham, Jr. The father had wanted his son to carry on in the family's service to God, but the roadblocks to the senior Bingham's desires to mold his son in his own image were numerous and interrelated: the family environment into which the child was born, the interaction of that nucleus with the larger community of Honolulu, and the son's later education on the mainland—each aspect contributed to the decline of Hiram III's attachment to the sacred; each stimulated his interest in the profane.

I

The circumstances surrounding Hiram III's birth on 19 November 1875 were traumatic as well as symbolic of his impending break with family tradition. A year and a half before their son was born, Hiram, Jr. and Clara Bingham had returned to the Gilbert Islands to resume briefly their mission station there. (In 1856 the Bingham had begun a Christian mission in the Islands, but after less than a decade of labor had fled the Islands, suffering from numerous maladies; the intervening years had not fortified them against the hardships there.) Soon after landing on Abaiang Island for this second time, Bingham, Jr.'s intestinal problems recurred; he again began to lose weight, strength and composure. As his wife noted in her diary, "weakness and often pain and depression are my loved one's portion. How like 1864."² Unlike that earlier year, however, Clara was now pregnant. As the pregnancy proceeded, her husband's strength withered; he was largely confined to bed. On 16 May 1875 the Bingham once again departed from the Gilberts, taking a circuitous route to Honolulu. From Abaiang, they sailed to Samoa, from there to Fiji, and then to Auckland, New Zealand; at each port Bingham had to be carried ashore and nursed back to health. And each port was successively further from Honolulu and the medical care both Bingham required. Finally, they were able to obtain passage on a steamer sailing for Hawaii, arriving but six days before Hiram III was born. Although his was an easy delivery, Clara was unable to suckle her child—"I had too little milk," she confessed in her diary; it "almost broke my heart."³

In other ways, too, the Bingham were incapable of nourishing their latest heir. The preoccupations of the aged household, where young

Hiram spent his early years, contributed to his weaning from the missionary heritage. When, for example, he reached his tenth year, his parents, though only in their fifties, were white-haired and invalid; indeed, they had been bed-ridden for much of their son's childhood. The other members of the household—Elizabeth Bingham and Lydia Bingham Coan—were older than their brother, Hiram, Jr., and no more spry. In Clara Bingham's words, the family consisted of "quiet almost worn out people."⁴ It could hardly have been a stimulating and vigorous environment for the child. Rather, it was one in which death played a prominent role. Apparently imminent for the elder Bingham (though none of them died during Hiram III's childhood), death was used to emphasize certain truths to the boy. When the Reverend Titus Coan, his uncle, lay dying in 1881, Bingham, Jr. urged his son to emulate this godly man's life. On several other occasions the father's own demise was linked to the son's sanctity: "Come to [Jesus Christ] now. Come to him before I go away to Him."⁵ Or, as he wrote his son when the latter was only three years old: "Your father is not a strong man, and it is not at all probable that he will live to see you in manhood; [if he does not, remember that] your papa prayed for you . . . that the Precious Savior would fold you in His arms."⁶

As pervasive as death were the innumerable mementos to past family accomplishments that literally surrounded the Binghams. The family home, Gilbertinia, was situated on a tract of land given to the first Hiram Bingham by Kaahumanu in the 1820s; nearby was the Kawaiahao Mission Compound in which Hiram, Jr. had lived as a boy and from which his father had worked to Christianize the Hawaiian Islands. The Binghams worshipped at the Honolulu Stone Church that had been constructed by the first Hiram's parishioners. When Hiram III attended Punahou School, its trustees had just dedicated Bingham Hall, and he certainly was aware that the School owed its existence to the generous gift of land made by his grandfather. Evidence of the Binghams' past influence and philanthropy was ubiquitous.

Jehovah and His works were equally prevalent in Gilbertinia, a further reflection of the past's hold over the family. When physically able, the Bingham parents accompanied their son and his two aunts to two religious services on the Sabbath and countless others during the week. It was also the family's practice to gather each day before breakfast for a private "morning watch." For social events, the Binghams strayed no further than church functions, or an occasional meeting of the local religious benevolent societies. At home, card-playing and literature were abhorred: the Bible and religious tracts were the literary staple. The

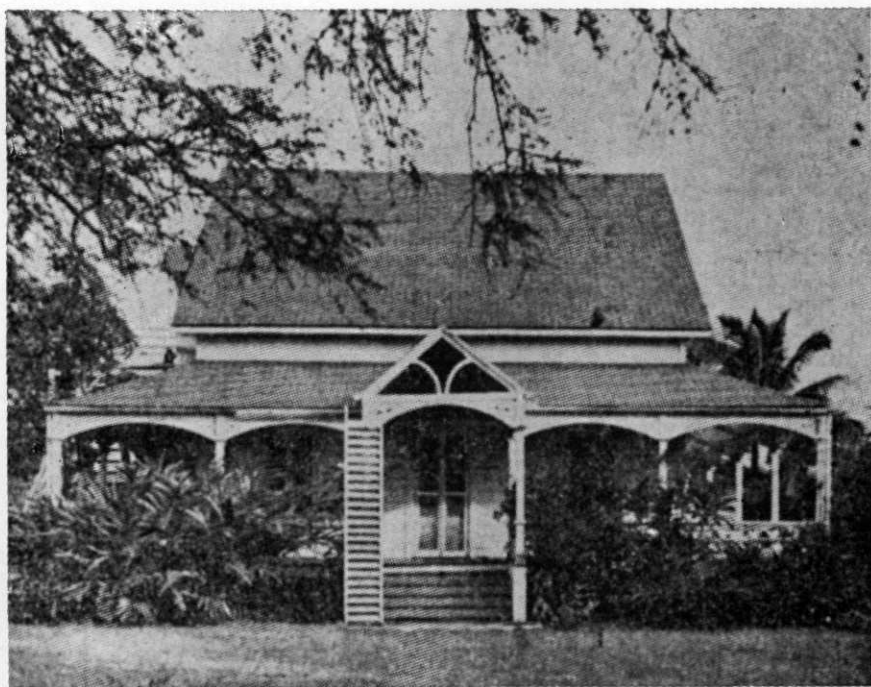


FIG. 1. "Gilbertinia," home of Hiram Bingham II and III. Located at Dole and Alexander Streets in Honolulu, it was built for the Binghams by the ABCFM. (Photo courtesy of the *Honolulu Advertiser*.)

Congregational religion and its various external expressions occupied most of the household's time.⁷

The Bingham's preoccupation with death, their heritage, and devotions might not have adversely affected their son's outlook had these views been held generally—but theirs was one of the few Honolulu homes so ordered; they stood out in relief like flotsam and jetsam stranded by an ebbing tide. In this, the Bingham's were not entirely alone, however. Their situation was mirrored in the status now generally accorded to the Protestant Mission in Hawaii.

Since the mid-19th Century, the mission's political and social power had steadily eroded, mainly as a result of the increased complexity of Hawaiian society and its burgeoning economy. This decline had important repercussions: decisions concerning acceptable social behavior, once the mission's prerogative, had been assumed by others who sported fewer religious scruples. Between 1850 and 1870, for instance, several test cases arose in which the mission opposed the influx of immorality—social dancing, the sale of alcohol, and theatrical productions. Each time the missionaries' desires were thwarted. Moreover, the Congregationalists began to realize that they no longer controlled the religious rites then practiced in Hawaii. Mormon, Baptist, Episcopalian and Catholic missionaries had successfully spread their own version of the Lord's word. Their influence was not limited to commoners either. When several members of the Hawaiian nobility died in the 1860s, it was an Anglican Bishop, not the usual Congregational minister, who presided at the funerals. The Protestant mission's central role in the life and death of the Hawaiians had passed.⁸

The ramifications of the mission's passing were also felt closer to home. Just as the indigenous Hawaiians were lured by new creeds, so too were the children of the Congregational missionaries; not only were they seen dancing and playing cards, but they entered secular callings. It is a tired observation, but still true, that missionaries and their offspring were prominent in the establishment of Hawaii's major commercial concerns. Most of the boys with whom Hiram III attended school were not missionary children even though they bore venerated names of the missionary past; neither did these children return to the fold, an understandable result of the Protestant mission's diminished status and influence.

To this marked change from his own boyhood, Hiram Bingham, Jr. had but one reaction. He constantly reminded his son that, unlike others, Bingham's had never succumbed to the attractions of wealth and a secular life. It was assumed that the third Hiram would not capitulate

either. Virtually every letter that exists between father and son from this period contains an injunction to avoid earthly entanglements, to remain pure for Christ. "I would rather have you be one of His . . . lambs," Bingham, Jr. wrote his five year old son, "than have you become a King on a beautiful island without Christ."⁹ Yet this plea cut both ways: its very enunciation indicated how rarely mission children now adhered to this principle. It is doubtful that five year old Hiram understood this or the nature of his father's worries. Soon, however, the differences between his family and the Honolulu community became clear. When that happened, his parents often tried to reassure their son that it was not a detriment to be "the son of a poor man," but young Hiram, not convinced, always worried about the social discrepancies he encountered.¹⁰ Despite his parents' efforts, Hiram III was no more immune than were his contemporaries to a life outside of God's fold.

At first his rebellion was covert, remaining but an aspect of his imagination. For instance, his parents had condemned novel reading as frivolous, a frivolity the young man secretly indulged every Saturday afternoon in the Honolulu Public Library. This building, he once wrote, was a welcome sanctuary and he read "in a remote corner of that unmolested refuge" as long as he dared. Thus fortified against his parents' strictures, he most frequently savored the "forbidden fruit" of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Considering the deception Bingham employed to read this and other novels, it is little wonder that he was "especially" delighted by "the line of lies" Huck had at his command to "get himself out of scrapes."¹¹ At least once, Bingham's life imitated Twain's art. At age twelve, "with dreams of rising from newsboy to wealthy philanthropist," he withdrew money from a Honolulu bank, obtained passage on a steamer bound for San Francisco, and was only discovered when the vessel was delayed and a friend gave away his plan.¹²

Although a failure, this attempted escape illustrates the extent to which Hiram III yearned for a world different from that in which he had been reared. The monuments to the Bingham family that dotted the Honolulu landscapes were, to him, truly relics of a past that he wished to push aside brusquely. The unencumbered Horatio Alger, who rose from newsboy to patron, had greater appeal. Moreover, that he longed to be a wealthy philanthropist contradicted his parents' teachings—the comfortable life, material advantages, and social position of such a man had certainly not been the guiding spirit behind the missionary careers of his forbears. With this choice of idol, he aligned himself with the urbane of Honolulu, not the devout. Finally, that the young man had pilfered his education fund to finance his voyage, a bank account for

which his parents had painstakingly sacrificed, added insult to injury. Stunned by their son's actions, the Bingham's apparently eased their restrictions on his life. They never recouped their losses, however. It is from this point that one can date Hiram III's persistent pursuit of social position and his dreams of mammon.

II

In 1892, two years after his ambitious escapade, Hiram Bingham entered Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. His parents had returned to the United States with him to oversee the publication of a Gilbertese Bible, and they felt it was time for their son to prepare for college. They also hoped that Hiram's attendance at Andover would lead him to return to the ways of the Lord. These years at the school would be significant for the young man—but not exactly in the way his parents envisioned. The atmosphere at Andover contrasted with that of Gilbertinia, and Hiram was intrigued by and receptive to the new ideas and new perceptions that he encountered. During these years (indeed throughout his youth), Hiram III would seek a middle ground, one that retained some of the religious characteristics of his parents' world, but one that also gave him some secular latitude.¹³

At first, homesickness forced Bingham to reconsider his previous impetuosity and disrespect. "Why was it, I wonder, that in my younger days I heeded so little of your advice," he asked his father. "Since I have been at Andover a great change has come into my life. . . . I have been taught to look to God because I hadn't you and momma to look to. . . ." ¹⁴ Further, young Bingham decided to abhor that which he had once run away from home to acquire—"the more I think about this world and the next the less I want to make money. Look at Jay Gould . . . what a record! The papers tell how many millions he amassed and in the next line tell about the men he *ruined* to get his money." Chastened, Bingham concluded solemnly, "how much better to be poor and save men instead of ruining men."¹⁵

Naturally, the senior Bingham's were overjoyed to learn of their son's changed perspective; how much easier their lives would have been had he maintained these beliefs. It is understandable, however, that his concern for more worldly affairs would re-emerge. Phillips Academy's social and academic environment clearly stimulated him in this regard. Like Honolulu, Phillips had once been heavily influenced by Congregational doctrine. But in the 1870s, under the direction of a new headmaster, Cecil F. P. Bancroft, the Academy began to shed its religious raiments. Bancroft severed the school's institutional ties with Andover

Theological School and deemphasized the religious training demanded of his students, decisions that reordered the school's daily life. Among other things, the number of required chapel services dropped sharply, morning and evening prayer meetings were disposed of, and the Bible Study Classes evolved into discussions of current events and literature. Bancroft refused to stress the necessity for religious conversion experiences. He also extensively revised the curriculum to include the sciences and humanities, and increased the size of the student body and the extent of its geographical distribution. Once the exclusive domain of New England, and particularly of Massachusetts (an emphasis that had reinforced the school's Congregationalist orientation), Phillips Academy had emerged by the 1890s as a "national" school without religious affiliation.¹⁶

This broad perspective was not lost on Hiram Bingham. Just as the increased complexity of Honolulu society had offered opportunities for his imagination to soar beyond the confines of Gilbertinia, so too did the diversity of life at Phillips Academy. One of the first things he realized, for instance, was that the majority of his classmates did not keep the Sabbath holy, but spent that day studying. Initially surprised by this behavior, Bingham quickly recognized the advantages offered by breaking the Sabbath: "it would greatly aid my Latin prose [to study on Sunday]" he advised his parents; although he knew that this did not "seem to be just what I have been taught was right," he decided that the scholastic gains outweighed the disadvantages of parental (and possibly divine) disapproval.¹⁷ Indeed this letter illustrates the moral flexibility Bingham sought. Could his parents truly object if he studied Latin, a Lordly tongue, on the Sabbath? In this decision to so study, Bingham remained true to himself without violating his parents' prescriptions. This shift in his outlook was not dramatic but is no less important for its subtlety.¹⁸

Another seemingly minor point that helped alter Bingham's perspective was the clothing that some of his classmates wore to Sunday services—often they came dressed in their athletic uniforms. This attire signaled the relative status students assigned to the Lord and to Andover athletics. The increasing stress on the latter was evident throughout the American educational system in the late 19th Century. While in William James' terms sports became the moral equivalent of war, it is also true that athletics became a way of strengthening the secular perspective, the secular bond between men. At Phillips Academy, a non-denominational school, the student body was not united by common religious beliefs but by the intense athletic rivalry with Exeter Academy. Bingham's

letters home reflect this, as he exulted in the fanfare surrounding each contest with the dread rival.¹⁹

Bingham also profited financially from the school athletic rivalry. In addition to managing the football team, he ran the food concession, accumulating a reasonable profit. On their own, such business dealings have little significance. Bingham discovered, however, that he had a flair for making money, an ability he exploited despite his earlier homily on the nefariousness of robber baron Jay Gould. Of course Bingham had to pay his way through school, and was therefore often in need of funds, but he did not particularly care how he acquired his pelf. The lure of financial gain often blurred his vision of moral rectitude. In the summer of 1894, for instance, he peddled a book, *What Can a Woman Do?*, throughout eastern Pennsylvania, using his religious connections to further his profit. To promote sales in each new town, he would head straight to the vestry of each church to secure the local minister's approval of the book. With that support, he would then attempt to sway the public. A shrewd salesman, he advised his parents that he was "getting to have favorable notions about the business."²⁰ In this respect, religion was a convenience not the lynchpin of his life.

Yet Bingham's years at Andover were not devoid of religious influences. Most emphatic of these was the weekly letter from his parents, but the school itself did not neglect its students' spiritual welfare, despite Bancroft's substantial overhaul of the curriculum. In compliance with school regulations, Bingham regularly attended Sunday services. Neither were his extra-curricular activities solely given over to athletics or commercial enterprises. Bingham joined and later was elected corresponding secretary of the Society of Inquiry, a student religious organization. As such, he was following in the footsteps of his grandfather and father who had belonged to branches of the same society in their youths.

The resemblance stops there, for Hiram's forbears' participation in the Society's activities had served to strengthen their missionary resolve. Such was not the case with the third Hiram. In the first place the Society was not a potent force in Andover life. Literary societies captured the attention of the majority of the student body, and Bingham was no exception to this trend; it was to "Philo" that he devoted "a good deal of [his] time."²¹ Moreover, the Society of Inquiry's emphasis had shifted from missionary service to political issues. Evidence of the effect this transformation had on Bingham is embodied in his response to a visit he paid, at his parents' request, to nearby Andover Theological School. He attended several lectures there, but came away unmoved, declaring: "these Theologue professors do not impress me favorably."²²

Bingham's life at Andover, and his own predilections, pulled him away from the traditional institutions of the Congregational Church—the Society of Inquiry, Andover Theological School, and, perhaps most sacred of all, the conversion experience. He never underwent the religious trauma that had been expected of his parents and grandparents. Nonetheless, he had not spurned religion or even missionary endeavors, but took part in these activities through his own generation's organization, The Student Volunteer Movement (SVM). He was attracted to the SVM, as were so many of his contemporaries, precisely because its guiding principles were markedly different from those of earlier Congregationalism.²³

In essence, the SVM compromised with the World in which it existed. Although the movement blossomed out of student religious meetings initiated in 1886 by Dwight Moody, a fundamentalist evangelical leader, the SVM's guiding light was Henry Drummond, a progressive theologian. In *The Natural Law and the Spiritual World* (1884), a book that made him popular with students, Drummond neatly reconciled God and Genesis with Darwin and Evolution, proving that the lion and the lamb could lie down together. His ideas raised the hackles of conservative religious leaders, but won the hearts of American college students. At Drummond's urging, the latter flocked to the SVM's banner.²⁴

To be more accurate, Drummond and the SVM appealed not to the hearts, but to the *minds* of youth. In contrast to earlier evangelicals who placed primary emphasis on emotional commitment as the basis for moral certitude and missionary activities, the SVM stressed the value of the development of a rational and intellectual foundation for one's commitment to God. The movement downplayed religious conversions born of introspection. The SVM conventions and the so-called Northfield conferences, where these principles were taught, were not therefore designed to arouse religious fervor but merely to spread "missionary intelligence." The form, function, and audience of these college seminars had little in common with the "anxious seat" and tent meetings of the Second Great Awakening.²⁵

The Student Volunteer Movement naturally inspired detractors. The Reverend Moody, for example, was repeatedly warned by his colleagues to steer clear of the movement, or better yet, to rid it of Drummond and his liberal theological views.²⁶ In distant Hawaii there was also disenchantment. The senior Bingham, who watched the Honolulu religious community decline in stature, and who trembled at every secular encroachment on religious life, were skeptical of a religious movement that prompted rapprochement between God and the spirit of the

world.²⁷ But it is not odd that Hiram III, who had been working on such a reconciliation as a child in Honolulu and as a student at Phillips Academy, should have gravitated to an organization that seemingly bridged the gap.

Other reasons for young Bingham's support for the SVM became evident in his reactions to the 2nd SVM International Conference held in Detroit in 1894. The SVM promoted a social and fraternal religion, one that glorified youth. The movement was a perfect embodiment of Muscular Christianity. These aspects appealed to Bingham, who devoted pages of his correspondence to descriptions of the Convention's fraternity life and its impact on his perceptions, particularly those concerning missionary service. Indeed, he suspected that his increasingly intense interest in future medical missionary work in China was inspired more by his compatriots' opinions than by any teachings of the Bible. Rather than an evangelical ministry in which one worked solely through faith, Bingham and most of his fellow conventioners were drawn to a medical ministry in which, through scientific detachment, "one reached souls through healing the body."²⁸ This was yet another illustration of the unsteady alliance between religion and science, the world and the Lord, that existed in the SVM. Unsteady, for it was a short step from this detached attitude exemplified by the medical missionary to one in which God need not be served at all. Ultimately, this was the step that Hiram Bingham and numerous other members of the SVM would take.²⁹

III

For Bingham, the final stage of this transition was achieved during his years at Yale College. He entered the school in the fall of 1894, just prior to his nineteenth birthday. Although the purpose of his college education, according to his father, was to prepare him for the ministry, events proved otherwise. His college years saw a steady movement away from that career. His reluctance was not solely a matter of personal obstinacy, for the same kinds of influences that he had been subject to at Phillips Academy were present at Yale. The changing composition of the student body, and the school's social structure and attitudes helped to secularize further Bingham's perceptions of his career.

Timothy Dwight the Younger, President of Yale, called the last two decades of the 19th Century at the College the "Outward Years," a reference to the materialistic spirit of the students. This new materialism, historians have observed, grew out of the influx of students from the upper-middle class created by the post-Civil War Industrial Revolution. These students reportedly valued a Yale degree not for its educational

benefits but for the social status it endowed, or for the lucrative business careers it promoted.³⁰ Young Hiram Bingham professed his dislike for this new orientation, and blamed the change on President Dwight's recruiting policies. "[He] apparently aims to make it a college of rich man's sons," Bingham informed his parents. But if Bingham sneered at the new attitudes, he was not above indulging in them. He viewed these "rich man's sons" not as potential converts but as means "for a poor fellow to earn his way through" college as a tutor. "There are so many . . . who will pay anything to get their degree."³¹ He too knew the value of a college education.

Bingham conformed to the standard set by Yale students in other ways as well. The most important aspect of a student's life, he observed in one of his first letters home from New Haven, was "his social standing and influence."³² Bingham's perspective accurately mirrored the contemporary Yale man's concerns. Student organizations controlled all facets of the school's life, and if one did not gain entry into the powerful social, athletic, or religious societies (preferably all three), then one would lead a shadowy existence for the next four years. This structure enforced a rigid conformity in thought and action, one Bingham readily supported.³³ "I cannot but hope that before I graduate I shall belong to one of the larger societies; I find that only those men run down secret societies who aren't lucky to get into one," he advised his father.³⁴ So that such a fate would not befall him, Bingham quickly joined a variety of organizations, among them the Yale Hawaii Club, Psi Upsilon Fraternity, and the Yale Union, a debating society. He had always been sensitive to his social position, and his efforts to secure and maintain his peers' acceptance formed one of the principal topics of his correspondence.

Inevitably, Bingham threw himself into the life of these societies, an activity his father felt was detrimental to his son's spiritual instruction—"you are in company too much. Before you know it you will reach the end of your rope."³⁵ Hiram III defended his actions with the Yale Credo: "a man at Yale is respected in proportion to what he does, what he accomplishes, and how well he accomplishes it;"³⁶ he must therefore continue his activities on behalf of these societies. Bingham also began to approve of personal habits that had long been scorned at Gilbertinia. After his initiation into the Yale Hawaii Club, for example, he noted that Albert Judd, another scion of a Hawaiian missionary family, smoked a pipe; and he admired Judd's insouciance. "It is certainly the proper thing to do," Bingham informed his shocked parents, "and it looks well." Over time, his concern for the "proper thing" led Bingham to take up card-playing ("90% of the fellows in College—if not more—do

it"), attend cotillions, read novels voraciously, and, during vacations, squire fashionable young women around Hartford or New York City. One's college years, he allowed in the contemporary argot, were a "smooth time."³⁷

Bingham's affectations exemplified what George Santayana deplored in Yale and its Spirit. "It seemed to me at Yale as if enthusiasms were cultivated for their own sake, as a flow of life, no matter in what direction," the Harvard philosopher wrote after visiting Yale in 1892.³⁸ Like his classmates, Bingham was perfectly willing to let what Santayana called "the drift of the times" direct his attentions. This was particularly true in religion. It was in his theology classes that Bingham learned to view the Bible in an allegorical sense, and to accept that its teachings and revelations were not necessarily true. He also joined with his contemporaries in debunking those evangelicals who occasionally preached from the College's pulpit. Their sermons were not "logical," Bingham wrote his parents, "and [thus] will not reach college men." Moreover, the evangelical demeanor was wrong for the times, "sensationalism and emotionalism" did not sit well with the "present spirit of the undergraduate body."³⁹ When Bingham's parents retorted that he should emulate those ministers he rebuked, and be "singular" in his beliefs, Hiram could only respond that, as a Yale man, he would not become a "crank."⁴⁰

Scornful of the old-fashioned men of God, Bingham was in awe of his college professors. Most notable among them was William Graham Sumner, whose courses in sociology, Bingham affirmed, were "very broadening and instructive."⁴¹ And it was this positive example of Sumner, of literature professor William "Billy" Phelps, and others, as much as the poor impression he had of the ministry, that drew Bingham away from a career as a medical missionary. Instead he vowed that he was best suited to become a secular teacher of men. He tentatively broached this subject with his parents during his sophomore and junior years, but by the fall of his senior year, Bingham was in earnest. He assured his parents that he was not taking this decision lightly: teaching young men in their formative years was not a meaningless occupation. He rather doubted that any position was as beneficial or as important as that of a schoolteacher. As he informed his father, "no minister has one-fifth of the chance to accomplish more good and affect the world more by his influence than a teacher."⁴²

The senior Bingham bitterly protested every step of their son's transition from medical missionary to teacher, using every means at their disposal. There was a cautionary tone in each of the many letters sent

to him during this period. He was warned to avoid "worldly temptations" during his Christmas vacations. They sent religious tracts outlining the evils of dancing after he described the joys of a cotillion. Every mention of a possible girlfriend brought forth a stream of advice against forming entangling alliances that would inhibit his future missionary career. They were appalled, for instance, that their only child was fond of a Christian Scientist: "to [so] link yourself . . . would be *fatal* to your spiritual life and usefulness," his father counseled; "*I* would not dare die a Christian Scientist."⁴³ Outside help was called in when his parents learned that young Bingham wanted to become a professor; they contacted family friends on the mainland to dissuade their son from this path. When these remonstrances seemed to have little effect on Hiram's behavior, his parents resorted to one of the basic sources of parental control—guilt:

I have often said that your coming to us in 1875 was one great means of bringing precious father up from long months of feebleness [Clara Bingham wrote]; and now, I am sure it is within your power to give him great comfort and joy, and so help him back to strength once more . . . [if he knows] that your heart is set upon . . . the Master's work.⁴⁴

That his heart was not then set upon the Master's work, his parents later agreed, was due largely to the profound impact that his educational experiences on the mainland had had upon him. But as important as the Yale years were in this regard, the senior Bingham must be given some credit for their son's ability to ignore their exhortations. In every letter in which they pleaded with him to stand by the Lord, they inadvertently provided him with reasons not to abide by their wishes. His father, for instance, continually recounted to his son the declining fortunes of the ABCFM, and by extension, of the Bingham family. During the late 19th Century the American Missionary Board was beset by a severe loss of patronage; fewer men of wealth and philanthropy donated their money to God's service. As a result, fewer missionaries were sent abroad under the ABCFM aegis, and those already in the field had their salaries slashed to keep the parent organization afloat. On several occasions the Bingham's stipend was reduced by ten percent. These limitations made it likely, the father advised the son, that the ABCFM would not be able to send him to China when the time came.⁴⁵ On a related issue, the Bingham's made certain that their absent son knew of every decline in piety in Honolulu society, and how that loss further isolated the inhabitants of Gilbertinia. Illustrative of this was Clara Bingham's complaint that even Punahou School, where young Bingham had studied as a boy, "was falling away from its formerly high spiritual standards, and the

world creeps in, as in so many places."⁴⁶ Finally, they relayed the news of their constant ill health.⁴⁷ These complaints were not entirely new to Hiram III, having been present since his childhood, but they certainly could not have inspired him to spend his future in an occupation so strewn with hardships, so fraught with instability, so lacking in community support. On the contrary, these jeremiadlike letters helped buttress his resolve to contradict his parents' wishes. These interwoven threads of social change and familial pressures, created room for worldly concerns in Bingham's consciousness.

Yet, for all this, "the world" was not paramount. As his senior year drew to a close, Bingham began to doubt his commitment to secular teaching, or more precisely, he became reluctant to break with his parents on this issue. In the words of his classmate Albert Judd, Bingham "had given up all ideas of going into missions or the ministry [but] he had not written his father of it."⁴⁸ This ambivalence left young Hiram susceptible to one final flirtation with the forces of the Lord.

An apostate, Bingham nonetheless had not withdrawn from the Student Volunteer Movement while at Yale—after all, it was a society to which college men belonged. Because of this connection, he was appointed to the Yale delegation to the SVM's Third International Conference in Cleveland in the spring of 1898. His parents prayed fervently that his attendance would stir his soul and that his heart would yearn "to be permitted to go to those who sit in darkness."⁴⁹ This proved to be a propitious prayer. Surrounded by enthusiastic collegiate Christians, and worried about his future, Bingham there reconsecrated himself to the cause of religious missions. Aflame with faith, he not only pledged his educational fund to the SVM's coffers, but, once the conference had concluded, he applied to and was accepted as a missionary to the Palama Chapel in Honolulu. The speed with which he had changed his resolution left him gasping; "I seem . . . to be approaching insanity" he concluded.⁵⁰ It was as if the erosion of his religious beliefs had never occurred.

His parents were equally startled by the swift alteration in the course of their son's affairs. Thankful for the events that led to his renewed faith, they now felt that his waywardness at Yale had been only that necessary period of temptation that all evangelicals must overcome before they could truly and wholly commit themselves to His service. Once within the family milieu, they thought, he could even be guided towards seeking a mission post in China. His father began to dream nightly of the glorious prospects: "I saw my boy making an assault upon that stronghold of Satan, Hunan."⁵¹

These reveries soon faded, however. Hiram's renewed association with the SVM was a brief romance and an ironic reversal of the prescribed evangelical cycle of doubt and redemption. His questioning of the secular life had led him to re-embrace God. This embrace assured him in fact that his proper calling was a teacher. The environment in which he found himself upon his return to Honolulu was in large part responsible for a second sharp turn of events in his life. Within six months of his return to Hawaii, he resigned his post at Palama; within a year he sailed from the Islands and entered graduate study in History at the University of California at Berkeley.

IV

Hiram and Clara Bingham had gratefully welcomed their son home in the early summer of 1898. As he was drawn to the family bosom, he was quickly reacquainted with the family religious rituals—the morning watch and the incessant attendance of church service—that had so irritated him as a boy. It was then that he realized how much he had changed during his six years in New England. After initially joining in the ceremonies, he began to skip the morning watch. In turn, his father began to question his son's devotion. Shortly thereafter the two started to argue broader matters of theology, arguments that followed the same lines that had defined their disagreements when the son had been in New Haven. Hiram challenged the validity of the Bible's teachings and contended that he could not locate passages to support the necessity for communion and baptism. At this, his father wondered how his son could then obey the Biblical injunction "go ye therefore and make disciples of nations." In short, how could Hiram, with his doubts, devote himself to a missionary career? This was, of course, precisely what he *was* pondering as he labored at Palama Chapel. And the Palama Chapel Governing Board was no more receptive to the young man's ideas than had been his father. Hiram III would later write that he had to resign his post because he "found it impossible to teach the very orthodox beliefs which those in charge of the mission expected to be taught."⁵² The religious interest sparked by the SVM conference in Cleveland only temporarily replaced the ideas that had played so important a role in Bingham's life at Yale.

These ideological reasons for Bingham's resignation were reinforced by other events. As his recharged faith diminished, so too did his health. His eyes began to trouble him and his throat "gave out so that he could no longer teach and sing . . . without pain and hard coughing."⁵³ The senior Bingham believed, or at least publicly expressed the belief, that

their son's illnesses arose from his deep commitment to his Palama parishioners. He "took hold of his mission work so enthusiastically . . . that he overdid [it]," Clara Bingham wrote one correspondent.⁵⁴ Other interpretations are more likely. It is probable that there was a psychosomatic component to his ailments. Without clear eyes and a strong throat, a missionary could not preach, could not effectively carry the message of God. Young Bingham had no choice but to resign his post at Palama. Once he left Honolulu, however, and had taken a job as a chemist for a sugar plantation on Molokai Island, his health quickly, miraculously improved. And with this recovery of bodily strength came a renewed declaration that a secular career was his destiny, a decision his father received with some anger. Bingham suspected that his son's poor health might be an "excuse for withdrawing from direct work for the evangelization of the world."⁵⁵ This suspicion was not without foundation.

There was, moreover, a romantic ailment that played an increasingly important role in Bingham's decision to leave Palama and Hawaii and to begin graduate study. During the summer of 1898, while he worked by day at the Palama Chapel, at night Hiram Bingham courted Alfreda Mitchell, daughter of Alfred and Annie Mitchell, an heir to the Charles Tiffany fortune. The two had met previously in the Mitchell home in New London, Connecticut, and had renewed their acquaintance when the Mitchells stopped in Honolulu while on a world cruise. Hiram and Alfreda's friendship deepened, and they professed their love—shocking both sets of parents. For the Bingham, the Mitchells were the very embodiment of worldliness, a disease they had spent their lives fighting. They knew only too well their son's proclivity for a life without God, and realized that this desire could only be enhanced by contact with the Mitchell's financial power, social status, and lack of spiritual attainment. The Mitchells were no more pleased by the arrangement, though their reasons differed. They wondered how any prospective son-in-law, who was an employee of Christ, could support their daughter in the accustomed manner. Before the Mitchells would allow a public engagement they suggested that young Bingham secure an advanced degree, one that would ensure respectability and an adequate income. Having made this pronouncement, the Mitchells sailed from Hawaii to continue their world tour. Soon thereafter, Hiram left the Palama Chapel for his job on Molokai.⁵⁶

This then was more than an affair of the heart. The battle lines could not have been more clearly drawn, and the odds against the elder Bingham could not have been more stacked. In fact, they never had a chance. Their son was in love, disillusioned with God, and ardently

desired an academic career. He knew that his desires would cause his parents pain. "Father, forgive me, O forgive me if you can," he wrote. "I know that this proposed plan of life is not in accordance with your wishes nor your beliefs. I am more sorry than I can tell."⁵⁷ Recognition of his parents' pain, however, did not hinder the young man from carrying out what he concluded was "the best plan for me."⁵⁸ In July 1899, the 24-year-old Bingham sailed from Honolulu to San Francisco.

In a sense, this voyage enabled Bingham finally to approximate his childhood fantasy of running away to become a wealthy philanthropist. Certainly his parents regarded his departure from the Islands as a defection from the family standard. Having thrown over "the faith of your father and mother, your grandfathers and grandmothers," Hiram III was left to the devil or Unitarianism, the two being synonymous. "You . . . will mingle much with men . . . who sympathize with Unitarianism and what it stands for," his father declared. No good could come from such an unholy alliance. If it happened, "none but God [will] sustain my sorrowing soul."⁵⁹ So hurt were Bingham's parents by his decision that when they notified the ABCFM of the change in his plans, they could only express themselves in the third person: "the disappointment of Hiram's parents is very great."⁶⁰

The senior Bingham's choice of slur—Unitarianism—was revealing. While it would have been appropriate in the context of his own youth, the charge carried little weight in 1900. He had lived such an insular life that, in his mind, the enemies of his childhood remained as unchanged as his beliefs. Indeed, it was the vast differences in their experiences that formed the basis of Hiram III's response to his father's blunt denunciation. Young Bingham brandished history as his weapon, declaring:

as I look back in history I see many instances of conflict of the old and new, of heresy and orthodoxy, of questions of doctrine, dogma, theology and faith. I often feel the world would [have] been far happier had each man learned to realize, recognize, and respect that which was high and noble in another's beliefs.⁶¹

With this pluralistic or at least tolerant attitude, he parted from the missionary certitude of cultural superiority. Moreover, he drew a parallel between these historical debates and the one in which he and his father were then engaged. To the son, the sources of the conflict were clear. He argued that their diverse educational experiences accounted for the clash of perspectives. "The more I study the more I seem to find new ideas which are different from those from my childhood," as well as from those of his father's childhood, young Bingham wrote. Men such as Professor Sumner had taught Bingham to "see that it is more heroic to think

independently” than to abide by dated dogmas.⁶² Bingham’s self-conscious use of history justified his behavior and his attitudes, but he also correctly perceived the directing forces in his life.

Private correspondence was not the only place in which Hiram III signalled his irrevocable split with his father and his world view. He made plain his dissent from the missionary tradition in his master’s thesis, “The Growth of American Superiority in Hawaii” (1901), in much the same manner as the evangelical convert was compelled to come out and publicly proclaim his beliefs. In this study Bingham did not quarrel with the civilizing impact the missionaries had upon the Hawaiians. He argued, however, that equal credit for the introduction of civilization should be given to the economic forces that had left their impress on the Islands’ social structure.⁶³ In a related note, the young historian suggested that the “extreme puritanical views” of the Protestant mission that his grandfather had led had been detrimental to the Hawaiian people. In the end Bingham doffed his hat to the missionaries but clearly indicated that he did not belong among them. In an elegiac passage the tone of which further indicates his distance, he declared:

much has been written about [the missionaries], and unnumbered are the abuses that have been heaped on their heads. They made mistakes. They were human. But they were [also] . . . Americans of the noblest type; men and women of sterling character and heroic mold. . . . Let him who would know the truth carefully study the printed records, follow the course of the missionaries from beginning to end; and then, although possibly not believing their creed, he will be ready nonetheless to stand with uncovered head and do honor to the grand heroes. . . .⁶⁴

For the remainder of his life, Bingham, who in 1911 rediscovered the Incan city of Machu Piccu, thought of himself as an explorer, a man who broke new frontiers. The first and most significant of these explorations, one that had defined his youth, was his struggle to strike out from the Bingham family’s past.

NOTES

¹ Richard Lowitt, *George W. Norris, The Persistence of a Progressive* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 422-423.

² Clara Bingham quoted in Alfred Bingham, “Sybil’s Bones: A Chronicle of Three Hiram Bingham,” *HJH*, 9 (1975), 26.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴ Letter, Hiram Bingham, Jr. to Hiram Bingham III, 29 November 1880, reel 6, Bingham Family Papers, UC-Berkeley (hereafter BUCB). The originals of these letters are located at the Hawaiian Mission Children’s Society and I am grateful to HMCS for permission to cite them.

- ⁵ Letters, Bingham, Jr. to Bingham III, 28 September 1881, 15 January 1882, 29 August 1879, reel 6, BUCB.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Description of Bingham family life drawn from family letters, BUCB, and Bingham Family Papers, Yale University Library (hereafter BYUL); I am grateful to Yale for permission to quote from this collection; Bingham, "Sybil's Bones," pp. 29-30.
- ⁸ Gavin Daws, "The Decline of Puritanism at Honolulu in the 19th Century," *HJH*, 1 (1967), 31-42.
- ⁹ Letter, Bingham, Jr. to Bingham III, 27 October 1881, reel 6, BUCB.
- ¹⁰ Letters, Clara Bingham to Bingham III, 21 July 1890, 29 September 1890, reel 16, BUCB.
- ¹¹ Hiram Bingham III, "Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn," ms. book report, 17 May 1898, BYUL.
- ¹² Bingham, "Sybil's Bones," p. 30.
- ¹³ Letter, Hiram Bingham, Jr. to C. P. F. Bancroft, 21 May 1892, Phillips Academy Archives, Andover, Massachusetts.
- ¹⁴ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 4 December 1892, BYUL.
- ¹⁵ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 8 January 1893, BYUL.
- ¹⁶ Claude M. Fuess, *An Old New England School* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1917), pp. 331-345, 385, 392-393, 402-403, 425-426, 428; John MacLachlan, *American Boarding Schools: A Historical Survey* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1970), pp. 39-41.
- ¹⁷ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 22 January 1893, BYUL.
- ¹⁸ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 8 January 1893, BYUL.
- ¹⁹ Fuess, *An Old New England School*, p. 393; letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 29 October 1893, BYUL; MacLachlan, *American Boarding Schools*, pp. 283-285.
- ²⁰ Letters, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 8 July, 25 August, 23 October 1893, BYUL.
- ²¹ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 12 November 1893, BYUL.
- ²² Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 22 April 1894, BYUL; Fuess, *An Old New England School*, pp. 425-428.
- ²³ James B. Reynolds, ed., *Two Centuries of Christian Activity at Yale* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), pp. 242-245; Clarence Shedd, *Two Centuries of Student Christian Movements* (New York: Association Press, 1934), pp. 284-286, 314.
- ²⁴ Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 201-203; George W. Pierson, *Yale College: An Educational Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), II, passim; Shedd, *Christian Movements*, ch. 18.
- ²⁵ Kett, *Rites of Passage*, pp. 201-203; Shedd, *Christian Movements*, p. 315.
- ²⁶ Shedd, *Christian Movements*, p. 287; James Findlay, *Dwight L. Moody* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 354.
- ²⁷ Letter, Clara Bingham to Bingham III, 13 November 1897, reel 16, BUCB.
- ²⁸ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 3 March 1894, BYUL.
- ²⁹ Kett, *Rites of Passage*, p. 176, Shedd, *Christian Movements*, ch. 16.
- ³⁰ Brooks M. Kelley, *Yale: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 299.
- ³¹ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 14 May 1893, BYUL.
- ³² Pierson, *Yale College*, pp. 19-21; Kett, *Rites of Passage*, p. 178.
- ³³ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 14 October 1894, BYUL.
- ³⁴ Letter, Bingham, Jr., to Bingham III, 9 November 1897, reel 16, BUCB.
- ³⁵ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 8 December 1897, BYUL.

- ³⁶ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 24 January 1896, BYUL.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ George Santayana, *The Middle Span* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 177.
- ³⁹ Letters, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 19 February 1895, 12 January 1896, reel 16, BUCB.
- ⁴⁰ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 9 March 1898, BYUL; letter, Clara Bingham to Bingham III, 14 September 1897, reel 16, BUCB.
- ⁴¹ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 9 March 1898, BYUL.
- ⁴² Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 9 November 1897, BYUL.
- ⁴³ Letter, Bingham, Jr. to Bingham III, 19 November 1897; letter, Clara Bingham to Bingham III, 19 November 1897, reel 16, BUCB.
- ⁴⁴ Letters, Clara Bingham to Bingham III, 17 January 1897, 15 December 1897, reel 16 BUCB; letter, Bingham, Jr. to Bingham III, 19 November 1897, reel 16, BUCB.
- ⁴⁵ Letter, Bingham, Jr. to Judson Smith, 6 December 1897, reel 16, BUCB.
- ⁴⁶ Letter, Clara Bingham to Bingham III, 3 December 1897, reel 16, BUCB.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*; letter, Bingham, Jr. to Bingham, III, 21 February 1898, BYUL.
- ⁴⁸ Letter, Albert Judd to father, 26 March 1898, BYUL.
- ⁴⁹ Letter, Bingham, Jr. to Bingham III, 21 February 1898, BYUL.
- ⁵⁰ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham Jr., 22 March 1898, BYUL.
- ⁵¹ Letter, Bingham, Jr. to Bingham III, 21 February 1898, BYUL.
- ⁵² Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 4 April 1898, BYUL; Hiram Bingham III, "Autobiographical Sketch," Box 97-16, BYUL.
- ⁵³ Letter, Clara Bingham to Clara Clark, 12 May 1899, reel 16, BUCB.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ Letters, Bingham, Jr. to Bingham III, 8 May 1899, reel 16, BUCB; 17 October 1899, BYUL.
- ⁵⁶ Letter, Bingham, Jr. to Bingham III, 15 May 1899; letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 20 May, 31 October 1899, BYUL.
- ⁵⁷ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 26 December 1899, BYUL.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ Letter, Bingham, Jr. to Bingham III, 5 January 1900, BYUL.
- ⁶⁰ Letter, Bingham, Jr. to ABCFM, 22 January 1899, reel 16, BUCB.
- ⁶¹ Letter, Bingham III to Bingham, Jr., 26 December 1899, BYUL.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*
- ⁶³ Hiram Bingham, "The Growth of American Superiority in Hawaii," Master's thesis University of California 1901, p. 39.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104, passim.